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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Extension Service

Washington 25, D. C.

Reserve

HIRED FARM WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>1/</sup>

INTRODUCTION

Hired farm laborers and their families comprise approximately one-fourth of the agricultural population of the United States. The status, opportunities, and contributions of such a large segment of our agricultural population deserve more attention. In recent years, approximately 14 million individuals worked on farms all or a part of the year. Of these, approximately 5 million were hired workers, including sharecroppers.

The farm labor problem is an integral part of the entire agricultural problem. In general farming sections, most hired farm workers are the sons or daughters of farmers, or are from nearby rural communities. Their problems are similar to the problems of farm operators and their families. Their well-being tends to advance or decline with the well-being of all agriculture.

In any consideration of hired farm laborers, the importance of the family unit must be recognized. Women and children frequently work, although the contract is usually between the head of the family and the employer. Provision must be made for women and children in all cases where the employer provides the housing. Because of these and other characteristics, the problems of hired farm labor differ from the problems of labor employed in non-agricultural industries.

During the war period, the stress occasioned by labor shortages and the need for all-out production has emphasized certain aspects of the farm labor problem. The importation of foreign workers, the use of prisoner-of-war labor, and the movement of seasonal migratory workers have brought unusual problems. It is to be expected that these problems will be much less important when conditions become more nearly normal.

The major types of farm laborers are regular farm workers, sharecroppers, local seasonal farm workers and migratory seasonal farm workers. Women and children are important portions of all of these major types. Boys and girls from the families of farm operators and from rural and urban communities normally constitute an important part of both the regular and the seasonal hired workers. Their well-being is of the utmost concern, not only to agriculture but to the entire Nation. For the most part, women and children employed as hired farm workers are

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<sup>1/</sup> This is a statement of the hired farm labor problem, with recommendations, by a committee whose names appear at the end of this report. The report was made after conferring with State Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station personnel and others who currently were conversant with farm labor problems. It was made at the request of the Federal Extension Office looking toward the improvement of the farm labor situation. The committee assumes entire responsibility for the statements made herein.



without the protection of labor laws applying to their employment in non-agricultural industries. Sharecroppers are classified as farm laborers since they usually occupy the same position as other types of farm labor and should be included in a hired farm labor program.

Migrant workers are important in the agriculture of certain sections. Examples of the many streams of migration are: the movement of workers from Florida as far north as New York; the movement of workers from Texas to states farther north; and the migration from points in the southern states westward to the Pacific Coast and as far north as Washington State. Some workers migrate from one region to others so that they may use particular skills as in the case of shearers of sheep. Others migrate with the harvest of a particular crop and take with them specialized equipment, such as combines, tractors and trucks.

The nature of the over-all farm labor problem in postwar years will depend upon the extent of employment in non-agricultural industries. If there is widespread unemployment in cities and in non-agricultural industries, many former farm people will return to the farm and increase the available farm labor supply. Even more important, under conditions of unemployment, will be the damming up on the farm of farm youth, who normally would move into non-agricultural employment. Relatively full employment in non-agricultural industry usually results in a scarcity of farm workers. Such employment tends to drain away from farms unneeded farm workers and in some cases workers who are needed.

Since hired labor is employed mainly on the farms which have the larger volume of production, the importance of hired help in producing farm products is somewhat greater than its proportional relationships would indicate. The availability of additional labor for short periods at harvest and other seasons of peak needs often determines the quantity of food and fiber available to the public.

There are opportunities for hired farm laborers to advance by becoming more skilled farm workers; by becoming farm operators; or by going to some types of non-agricultural employment. Many factors tend to limit full realization of these opportunities. The thoroughgoing cooperation of employees, employers and the public is needed to place hired farm laborers in a position where they will be encouraged to take full advantage of these opportunities.

## PROBLEMS OF HIRED FARM LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES

Some of the problems of farm labor in the United States are discussed below.

### 1. Income

Historically the wages of farm labor have been relatively low. The level of farm wages should be sufficiently high to permit farm laborers and their families to have a standard of living comparable with other groups of equal skill. Full employment in non-agricultural industry tends to cause a relative shortage of farm labor and good markets for farm products. These, in turn, will result in relatively high farm wages.



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## 2. Full Employment

It is desirable that the farms of the United States develop more year-round employment so more of the farm workers will be fully employed throughout the year. This may be accomplished by developing a year-round business or by further mechanization. Mechanization may reduce the total labor required, but it does this chiefly by reducing peak labor requirements. In some parts of the country, year-round employment may be attained through area diversification. Cooperation between producing areas which are dependent upon migratory labor should be encouraged so that it will result in the efficient movement and continuous employment of migratory workers. Cooperation among neighboring farmers in the exchange of labor to care for seasonal peaks in labor requirements should be encouraged. The possibilities of the joint use of labor supply by local industry and the farm should be investigated.

## 3. Incentives and Rewards

Farm operators, farm workers and others concerned should give consideration to ways of stimulating interest in the farm business on the part of hired workers. This might include payment for piece work, bonuses, sharing of receipts, and the granting of perquisites.

## 4. Social Security

The application of old age and survivors' insurance to farm workers seems desirable. Immediate studies should be made of the advantages, disadvantages, and costs of extending to farm labor the unemployment provisions of the social security act. There is evidence that the application of this insurance to city workers and not to farm workers tends to restrict the movement of labor from city to farm.

## 5. Workmen's Compensation and Employer's Liability

Workers in agriculture should have the protection afforded through workmen's compensation. Employers of farm labor in all states are entitled to specific understanding of the extent of their liability for their workmen and should have full opportunity to obtain adequate insurance to cover their liability. State laws vary widely in this respect. Relatively few farm workers are now covered and few farm employers are insured.

## 6. Housing

Ways and means should be devised to provide farm labor with satisfactory housing at costs within the range of the farmer's or farm worker's ability to pay. The need of farm workers for improved housing should be given similar consideration in public action as the need for housing by other workers in the population.

## 7. Camps for Farm Laborers

The provision of suitable housing for migratory seasonal help should be an obligation of the employer. In areas where large numbers of seasonal workers are employed this may involve producer cooperation in providing group housing. Camps constructed and owned by the Federal government should be sold or leased



to producers or producer groups under terms that will insure their satisfactory operation. To insure satisfactory camps, it is essential that states establish and enforce codes of minimum housing standards.

#### 8. Sanitation

Sanitary arrangements for the farm worker and his family should meet the minimum standards for health and decency. These should include adequate and wholesome water supplies, effective sewage disposal and protection from pests.

#### 9. Health

Good physical and mental health is essential for effective work. The workers and their families should have available adequate medical and hospital care. The risks of unusual costs for hospital and medical services should be spread by means of insurance. These principles apply to hired farm workers as well as to all workers.

#### 10. Education

The children of hired farm workers should have opportunity to obtain an adequate education. Sons and daughters of both employers and employees should have opportunities for vocational training in agriculture, in allied occupations, in home economics, in trades and industries, and in other vocations so that these youth may choose whether to remain in agriculture or to seek employment elsewhere with assurance that they will be adequately trained for the occupation chosen. Educational programs for both children and adults should include training in the essentials of sanitation, health, and nutrition. Special attention should be given to the education of the children of migrant workers.

The Agricultural Extension Service should make a greater effort to reach the hired farm worker and his family with its educational program.

#### 11. Opportunity for Advancement

Employment in agriculture should give the hired worker an opportunity to make savings and to advance as a farm laborer or from laborer to tenant and to farm owner. Satisfactory employment contracts to facilitate such savings and advancement should be available and come into more general use.

#### 12. Community Participation

In most communities, farm laborers and their families do not participate in the organized social activities of the community. The hired farm worker and his family should have opportunity to take part in community affairs either through participation with similarly employed persons and their families or through the established organizations of the community.

#### 13. Impact of Technological and Mechanical Improvements

It is to be expected that technological improvements and the mechanization of agriculture will continue and their rate of adoption may be accelerated in the postwar period. These movements are desirable. They change farm labor requirements by increasing the need for skilled workers, by increasing the productive



capacity of farm labor and by decreasing the need for seasonal labor. The extent and the consequences of these changes should be determined at the earliest possible time and appropriate steps taken to avoid or relieve distress arising therefrom.

#### 14. Problems Growing Out of Population Characteristics

Differences in race, in nationality, and in other population characteristics give rise to problems affecting farm labor. Any effective approach to the improvement of farm labor relations must recognize these problems.

#### 15. Farm Labor Supply

The labor supply available for employment on farms should be consistent with a balanced economy for the entire Nation and the resulting high level of prosperity for all groups. It must be recognized that farm prosperity historically has been associated with a relative shortage of farm labor and the consequent high level of farm wages. A considerable proportion of the farm-reared boys and girls should, and normally do, find employment in non-agricultural industry. For most of the agriculture of the United States, the problem of maintaining a balance in labor supplies consists in keeping the avenues of opportunity open so that un-needed farm youth may move into non-agricultural employment and at the same time a sufficient number of well qualified farm youth will be encouraged to continue in farming. The major problem pertaining to the farm labor supply in normal times is to avoid an oversupply of farm labor. However, there will be a continuing and possibly an increasing need for a large number of regular hired farm workers.

The urgent need for seasonal farm workers will continue in many areas although their relative importance may diminish in future years. They furnish the labor needed to complete the production and harvesting of many important commodities and consequently it is essential that an adequate supply of such labor continue to be available. Advantage should be taken of all improvements and changes that reduce the need for migratory workers. The movement of the seasonal workers to and from the farms where employed should be effected efficiently from the standpoint of both employee and employer.

#### 16. Women and Children as Farm Laborers

Women and children do many types of farm work. In many cases, their employment for such work raises no serious problems. In other cases, their conditions of employment do raise serious questions. Women should not be employed to the detriment of the home, their health or the care of their children. Children should not be employed in farm work when such employment seriously interferes with their education. In all cases, standards of health, sanitation, decency and safety should be maintained. These are problems concerning which too little is known. Careful studies should be made and the results used as a basis for constructive correction of undesirable conditions.

#### 17. Recruitment and Placement of Farm Labor

To accomplish efficient movement and employment of farm labor there must be effective means of recruitment and placement. Such work must be based on adequate forecasts of labor needs and of labor supplies. Reliable information on the needs for farm laborers and the sources of farm labor supplies should be assembled in advance and made widely available.



19. To make such a labor program effective, an appropriate agency should have the responsibility for recruiting and placing farm laborers. Employment arrangements should be made between employers and employees, with public agencies performing only such functions as cannot be satisfactorily performed by the other parties. In future plans for the recruitment and placement of farm laborers, full advantage should be taken of the experiences of the Agricultural Extension Service in handling these problems.

18. Organizations of Employers of Farm Labor  
and Organizations of Farm Workers

Organizations of employers of farm laborers, frequently along cooperative lines, which exist in some sections of the country have facilitated the development of recruitment, utilization and housing programs. The experiences of these groups should be assembled, analyzed and made available. Organizations of farm laborers have not been widely developed in this country. There is need for careful study of experiences in the United States and in other countries so that farmers and farm workers may have the advantages of the experience gained.

SOME SUGGESTED LINES OF ACTION

1. Recruitment and Placement

It is recommended that the Extension Service and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture, working in cooperation with the Land-Grant Colleges, obtain and make widely available adequate information concerning current farm labor needs and the potential supplies of farm labor.

It is recommended that one agency be responsible for the recruiting and placing of farm labor in each state, and that government agencies cooperate to the full extent necessary to make this possible. It is expected that such services will supplement and not displace the efforts of agricultural producers to obtain labor or of farm laborers to obtain employment.

The essential characteristics of such a recruitment and placement agency include:

- a. Understanding of the quantitative and qualitative needs of agriculture for labor.
- b. The ability to function on an interstate basis.
- c. Understanding of the character of the movement of labor to and from farms and other employment.
- d. Understanding of the problems and ambitions of farm workers and potential farm workers and their families.
- e. Close working relations with existing agricultural agencies to take advantage of their understanding of the inter-relationships between farm labor and other agricultural problems.



- f. Understanding of the interrelationships between agricultural and non-agricultural employment from the standpoint of both employees and employers.

## 2. Interstate Movement of Farm Workers

It is recommended that farm workers be free to move from area to area insofar as such movement is consistent with the protection of the interests of the workers and their obligations to employers.

## 3. Incomes of Farm Workers

It is recommended:

- a. That full advantage be taken of all opportunities to establish and maintain the incomes of hired farm workers at levels that will permit them and their families to have a standard of living comparable with other groups of equal skill. The continued payment of such incomes is possible only when farm incomes are high enough to permit it.
- b. That greater use be made of incentives that reward farm laborers for efficient and effective work.
- c. That, with year-round farm workers, greater use be made of sharing and other plans that give the laborer an opportunity to accumulate property.
- d. Where the worker is paid with a share of the crop, his share should be in proportion to his contribution in producing the crop.
- e. That continued emphasis should be placed upon providing farm workers with opportunities to produce or obtain meat, milk, vegetables, fuel, etc., needed for family consumption.
- f. In the case of migratory workers, attention should be given to means which will insure the laborer employment a major portion of the year.

## 4. Workmen's Compensation and Employer's Liability

It is recommended that all hired farm labor be adequately covered by workmen's compensation insurance. It is recommended that farmers protect themselves with employer's liability insurance.

## 5. Old Age and Survivors' Insurance

It is recommended that farm laborers be included in the social security program for old age and survivors' insurance.



## 6. Education

It is recommended that educational facilities available to farm laborers and their families be extended and improved in the following ways.

- a. Further development by the State and Federal Agricultural Extension Services of educational programs to reach hired farm laborers and their families as well as their employers. These programs should include:

1. Home economics including nutrition
2. 4-H club work
3. Work with young farm people
4. Training in technical skills and efficiency of farm workers
5. In cooperation with other agencies, programs pertaining to health, housing, sanitation, nutrition, and other related problems.
6. Programs designed to improve farm operator and hired worker relations on matters such as contractual relations, legal status, labor management and utilization, supervision, the recognition of responsibility of both employer and employee, and other pertinent matters.
7. Programs designed to encourage balanced farming systems that would provide year-round employment
8. General educational work helpful to farm laborers and their families

b. General education

1. Provision of educational facilities for the children of farm laborers, the same as, or comparable to, those provided other children. Steps should be taken to insure that children of farm laborers, particularly those of migrants, take full advantage of the provisions for general education.
2. Increased emphasis in schools on vocational training in the fields of agriculture, in allied occupations, home economics, trades and industries, and other vocations that will broaden the opportunities of rural youth to engage in needed and satisfying employment.
3. The development and offering of courses in the field of farm labor in colleges of agriculture.



## 7. Health

It is recommended that farm laborers and their families have the benefits of existing facilities and programs for the maintenance and improvement of health. Plans should be developed to provide adequate medical and hospital services to hired workers and their families, including plans for insurance to cover the costs.

## 8. Housing

It is recommended that each state develop minimum standards appropriate to local conditions for the housing of hired farm laborers.

## 9. Electrical Service

It is recommended that electrical service be made available to farm laborers and their families as rapidly as it becomes available to farm operators.

## 10. Sanitation

It is recommended that minimum standards for sanitation applying to the living conditions of farm workers and their families be developed and enforced by state and local health agencies.

## 11. Research in Field of Farm Labor

It is recommended that a comprehensive program of research in the field of farm labor be outlined and put into effect as rapidly as possible by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the U. S. Department of Agriculture and the state agricultural experiment stations. The types of research now urgently needed include:

- a. Analysis of farm labor needs and farm labor supplies.
- b. Methods of compensating farm labor.
- c. The social and economic outlook of farm laborers.
- d. Organization of farm laborers and of employers of farm labor.
- e. The application of social security legislation to farm laborers.
- f. Workmen's compensation and employer's liability as related to farm employment.
- g. Health, sanitation, and housing facilities for farm laborers and their families.
- h. Educational facilities and programs for farm laborers and their families.
- i. Trends in labor requirements as affected by mechanization, technological changes, shifts in areas of production, and other factors.



- j. Trends which affect the number, the type and the economic and social status of farm laborers.
- k. Job analysis and its relation to the work output and the income of farm laborers.
- l. Analysis and appraisal of state and Federal legislation pertaining to farm labor.

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June 21, 1945  
Washington, D. C.

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